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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL ROBERT HOLMES, USAF, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS FOR CENTCOM VIA TELECONFERENCE

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GEN. HOLMES: Okay. It's Bob Holmes, and I'm back with you. How are you doing this morning?

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Very good, sir. Thank you very much for joining us.

Brigadier General Robert Holmes joining us with the bloggers roundtable today. He's the deputy director of operations at Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base down in Tampa, Florida.

Thank you, sir, for taking the time out and joining us today.

GEN. HOLMES: You betcha. Thank you.

I really enjoyed the last roundtable we had. I guess now it's been about three weeks ago.

MR. HOLT: Mm-hmm. (In affirmative.)

GEN. HOLMES: And I told Captain Hassan (sp) that I would like to continue these as long as they're valuable to you. So I wanted to see if we could set another one up and we'll see how this goes.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Yes, sir, we're finding this very valuable.

Do you have an opening statement to start us off with today?

GEN. HOLMES: Well, I think -- just shortly to say we're three weeks into maybe a month into the last surge elements getting in place. Of course, security operations started and commenced before that point in time, but now we can begin to see, I think, General Petraeus be able to execute his plan along with the doctrine for -- you know, the security operations that must be in place.

And just as a matter of getting ready for this, I pulled out the counterinsurgency or the insurgency counterinsurgency manual that General Petraeus had overseen, as he was the commander at the doctrine activity, and see how things are playing out, one, with the military and then how important it is to see the integration of all

of the other elements of power and activity that must go along when we are engaged in a counterinsurgent fight.

So I'm very interested to see how this plays out.

As I look at our current situation, frankly -- and I'm really cutting through what I think is the wheat and the chaff here and looking at the effectiveness of the security operations on the ground, looking at the effectiveness of the Iraqi forces being able to take the lead, be able to bear parts of the main effort, if you will, and I think that we see some success on the ground. That is overshadowed by the horrific events that are, in my mind, very strategic and very well-planned by the insurgent or terrorist violent actors in order to be a weapon of mass effect, to draw focus off of the elements of the security operation that are doing some good things; to take focus off of the development of the political apparatus, the rule of law that must, you know, get hold there, the economic development that must take hold.

So what we see is this violent and desperate enemy as it will do these singular and very spectacular acts of violence in order to derail or to take the focus off of the good things that are happening. And this is right out of the first chapter of the counterinsurgency manual, if you will, as you read through that, and it can be expected of an insurgent or resistant fighter in an asymmetric fight.

We look at the tribal leaders as they engage the fight against al Qaeda. There's probably a 50-50 view of that. Some people think it's good, some people think it's bad. It's working. Is there risk? Yes. Might these tribal leaders do something else in the future? Yes, they might. But what we have are Iraqis fighting for Iraq, and they're doing it -- in some cases I've even heard this analogy -- and this is okay with me -- the tribal leaders are taking up arms, working with the coalition forces, because they hate al Qaeda more than they hate the U.S. and the coalition forces.

That may be, but you know what? If Iraqis are fighting for Iraq, that's okay. And I don't know how else to put that.

So I guess that's my opening on Iraq. As we talk more we can get into the other parts of the theater, but I had a feeling that some of your questions would probably be more focused on Iraq, the surge and what's going on. So let me just leave it there in terms of opening and then see what you've got for me.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

And Andrew Lubin, you were first on the line, so why don't you go ahead and get us started?

And once again, I want to remind you guys to please just state your name and your publication prior to asking your questions, so let us begin.

Andrew.

Q Good morning, General, Andrew Lubin from ON Point. How are you today?

GEN. HOLMES: I'm doing great. It's good to talk to you again.

Q Good, appreciate the time you've spent with us.

General, when I was in Pakistan a couple months ago, the -- what the Marines were doing -- were going to send some of the generals and some of the NCOs back to the States for some specific training. With trying to get the Iraqi army spun up, are there any similar plans to take some of the better staff NCOs and some of the senior leaders -- get them back -- bringing them back here and get them work in a more Western-type of a military knowledge?

GEN. HOLMES: I am not personally aware of that but I would have to support that as being a very, very good thing just in, you know, training and keeping those guys engaged. It strengthens our relationships and it influences those partnerships that in the end can contribute to regional stability. And that's really, at Central Command, what we're all about. So I view that as a very, very good thing.

Q Great, thank you.

GEN. HOLMES: Okay, Richard Fernandez.

Q Hi, General.

I was wondering whether the enemy forces are also countersurging. That is to say reinforcing their men inside Iraq. And is there any viable way of cutting down on that?

GEN. HOLMES: I -- that is a very, very good question -- just this morning was reading a classified report on the fight that we've got going against the resistant, insurgent or terrorist fighters. And I use those three terms because in a sense, it's not just one thing; it's a combination of all three.

But clearly -- and I think you're going to hear more and more of this in open-source reporting; I know that MNF-I has been carrying some of this information to the open source regarding the success that we have had against al Qaeda in Iraq. Clearly, as I read the report this morning, I can see that we're attacking that network within Iraq. We've done a lot of damage, more so than -- you've heard that from me before you've heard it from Central Command and MNF-I before; now there are greater reports of the damage that we have done.

Now, having said that, again, I'll tell you what I've told you before, this is still a very dangerous enemy. It's still very connected. But as we see this damage that we're doing, what we've got

to watch is to see where does the movement go now. In some cases, we've stripped through the leaderships of that, whereas before a cell would have a leader taken out and another person was ready to step up and fill the gap. What we see in some cases, I think, is that it's becoming more difficult for certain cells to repair, if you will.

But we've also then got to notice is, okay, where does the movement proliferate? If we put too much pressure here and we're doing damage, the nature of this enemy is to adapt, to flex and to move somewhere else, so we've got to go, okay, we're being successful here, but now what does this mean elsewhere so that we don't lose our guard? And those elsewheres might even be outside of Iraq. Here again, this goes back to the nature of this enemy in that it is, in addition to being very violent and very adaptive with its violence, it's very creative, it's very adaptive with regard to its transnational means to proliferate itself and to communicate across the Internet with itself, to train across the Internet and to recruit across the Internet.

So we're seeing success. We're seeing the cells that we've had that success with maybe not repair so quickly, but we also see -- and it's even being reported -- and you've seen the last probably 96 to 120 hours of media comment on the strengthening of al Qaeda.

So I can say yes, we're doing this in one place, but then in the other, with this enemy, you've got to be prepared on other fronts.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

David Axe.

Q General, this is David Axe. I write for Military.com, Wired's DANGER ROOM, Aviation -- (inaudible) -- and some others.

You know, I hope you can help me get over this, but I've heard the line for a couple years now that spectacular attacks by extremists, by al Qaeda in Iraq represent a sign that security operations are working. But at what point do we have to acknowledge that the continued attacks mean that in fact security operations have to some extent continued -- have failed, because the attacks are possible?

GEN. HOLMES: Well, the -- that -- you have just presented a paradox of asymmetric and insurgent warfare. The spectacular attacks are what I call, you know, attacks using weapons for mass effect. And they're designed, in my mind, to do just that, to create this mass effect for spectacular coverage in the media; to create spectacular terror in the minds of a population, a populace of people; to create chasms in national wills; to create doubt in military forces.

So these things are done to do -- to create effect. And as you succeed in securing, as you succeed in an insurgent fight or an asymmetric fight to win hearts and minds, then this asymmetric opponent sees the -- now the danger, the threat to his cause. So the

way to attack is through a spectacular event.

Then the paradox: the more successful you are, the more spectacular the events.

So the question you've just posed -- How effective is the security operation? -- that goes back to, I think, in my mind what Central Command has always said, is that it can't be just a military security operation solution alone. You secure in order to be able to provide the other elements of activity and power, to include the political, the diplomatic, the economic, that eventually root out the insurgent actors so that there's no longer even the base or the means to conduct these spectacular events.

And where does the culminating point come in this kind of battle? That's hard to say, because this requires a unity of effort across all lines of operation other than military. So this is where now as you look at this kind of fight and we look clearly to other partners across the interagency, across international, partnering in some cases even with non-governmental organizations, to say when is it that we do enough in this kind of fight that we reach a culminating point so that the security operations do what they're intended to do.

And I've not tried to side-step your question as much as I've tried to say, you know, this is a fight where all of the metrics and rules for conventional linear warfare don't necessarily apply. Many of the principles apply, the principles of war apply, but the metrics that we've been comfortable with for so many years don't necessarily apply in this kind of warfare.

Q General, could I follow up on that real quick?

GEN. HOLMES: Sure.

Q I just got back from Afghanistan, and the contrast with Iraq was incredible in terms of the number of NGOs, the number of government aid agencies in Afghanistan -- the EU, U.N. You know, it's possible for aid workers to actually work in Afghanistan. How close are we to having that kind of situation in Iraq where the civilian aid workers can get out again and actually do their work?

GEN. HOLMES: I've got to -- in my heart of hearts, I would like to say we're close, because all of us, particularly on the military side of this, have been at this for a while and we've seen not only the U.S. forces but the coalition forces continuing to do the combat operations that will open the door for this kind of effort. And that's why I'm looking for that culminating point. I would like to say we're close. Ultimately, I've got to look to other federal departments, particularly the State Department, and Commerce, Transportation, others who will be, hopefully, engaging with other international organizations to do these things.

But clearly, outside of Baghdad we see where there are -- those kinds of things that are going on, we're just not getting that story out there and the awareness level. And really what I'd like to do is

offer right now maybe another session where we address just that.

Q Yeah, that would be great.

GEN. HOLMES: For those things that are going on outside of Baghdad. I am intuitively aware and know that we've got good things, where we've seen the Iraqis take charge of security in certain areas, take the lead. I'm aware of good things in terms of building clinics and schools and orphanages. But those things then in this insurgent fight become targets for this enemy because they don't want those good things to happen. So what I want to do is in my mind get a good, clear picture of that, and I'd like to share that with you maybe in another outing of this forum.

Q That sounds great. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir. That sounds very good.

Charlie Quidnunc, you're with us, aren't you?

Q Yes. General, I've been reading a lot in the media about -- especially TIME Magazine and New York Times, that this is really not al Qaeda, it's just some sort of a Sunni group that took the name, and they didn't exist before we went into Iraq, they claim. Now, the evidence that was presented yesterday by General Bergner is great, but I think we need more, maybe if we can get Internet chat room transcripts or documents or other interrogation results that we could say, okay, these guys really are the same ones who attacked us on 9/11.

GEN. HOLMES: Okay. And that's an excellent point. Let me see. I think the best answer there is you make an excellent point, and I think what I need to do is look at where we are on threading through this. Because I firmly believe that it is al Qaeda influenced, but there are other threads there other than al Qaeda, the other external actors that have interest in whatever Iraq turns out to be and who definitely don't want to see a successful, independent, free Iraqi state.

And again I go back to it's not just -- that's why I use and spread the term out, resistance fighters, insurgents and terrorists, because in my mind it's threaded through many interest groups, that range from in some cases organized crime, to ethnic and tribal interest groups, to some external actor interest groups, to the terrorists.

And they're all in a feeding frenzy to have this terrain.

And so it's not -- and that's what's complicated, in my mind, this endeavor in Iraq because there are these threads of interests that manifest particularly themselves with these threads of violence. So in some cases, it's never just been a clean, clear one violent actor, it's been many, and when these things happen, this kind of violence feeds upon itself. It becomes, in my mind, a violent feeding frenzy, which is why in some ways the political resolution or a rule of order

and law to be in place is how you eventually get over this.

In some ways -- I mean, you go back to the way the Wild West was in our own United States so many, you know, years ago, and that, you know, everybody wants to have that terrain. The Indians wanted it, the gold miners wanted it, the banditos wanted it, whoever wanted it, so they operated in the Wild West.

So it takes time to institutionally develop all of the instruments of power that have got to be in place in order to provide a free and independent state.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And Jarred Fishman.

Q Good afternoon, sir.

GEN. HOLMES: Hi.

Q My question is, in dealing with the EFP and the special secret cells backed by the Iranians, obviously, what are we doing to make sure that we can crack down on the flow of those? (Off mike) -- fairly successful to a certain extent, but on the other hand, we're not actually taking out where they're coming from. It's kind of like chasing, you know, mice running out of the field.

GEN. HOLMES: The -- well, first let me address the EFP and the external actors that, if you will, export those tactics, techniques, equipment and the procedures for using those in our battlespace.

Clearly, we've connected that to an Iranian influence and specifically belonging to the Qods Force. But from where I sit, I make no further connection back to regime-sponsored or a nationally sponsored activity. So I don't have a good common operational picture, if you will. And what I'm most concerned about is as it manifests itself clearly in Iraq -- as we've seen just a very few of these appear elsewhere -- and that we know where this idea comes from and we are pinpointing the cells, the special groups, and we're going after them and we've been able to have some success -- we've -- (audio break) -- to continue.

I think right now -- and -- (audio break) -- very clear in saying this -- is that regionally it's very important that diplomatic and political solutions assist us as we look at these cells that are most immediately in the foxhole of our immediate battlespace, but that if there are external actors -- (audio break) -- to advocate to foster as -- that we clearly need moderate voices of the region coupled with the very -- (audio break) -- international voices to speak to those who could do something about this and pursue diplomatic and political. Because if we clearly just continue to make the fight against these kinds of networks clearly a military or a direct action, kinetic kind of business, we may not enjoy the success that we would like.

I maintain that the improvised explosive device is a weapon used for mass effect by terrorists and by insurgents, and that clearly -- well, intuitively, I believe that they're supported by networks and it's not just a single network, and that we've got to go after those networks, to include everything from their leadership to their -- through their recruiting offices, their training offices, their supply chain facilitators to their pots of money, and disassemble, disrupt and destroy these networks. Because this problem is not just manifesting itself in Iraq; we've got to take a regional and an international view and defeat these networks systematically.

Just yesterday IEDs in Pakistan killed 33. Two suicide bombers in Pakistan.

One thing that I'm trying to uncover is the trend of proliferation, and antidotally (sic) somebody told me last week that, you know, you really ought to look at the trend of IEDs in Pakistan over the last few years. So I've got our IED shop looking into that, because I think that we've got to take a look at these networks and these cells, one, as they manifest themselves in our immediate battlespace, but then as they go elsewhere.

So I know I branched off your question, and I hope you forgive me for that. But it's not just these few cells and this one area and this one external actor. It's many.

We are going after that -- the EFP business, though.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Grim.

Q Good morning, General, or good afternoon, evening, where you are.

GEN. HOLMES: Yeah. Today it's morning. I'm in Tampa.

Q Oh, good. Oh. Welcome home.

GEN. HOLMES: It's good to home.

Q You actually ended up right where I wanted to be, so your last answer worked out well for me. I know you guys have a public affairs project you're about to kick off on trying to influence Iraqis at the grass-roots level to reject IED makers, to reject the actions of IEDs, and to kind of bring the Iraq honor and shame culture to bear on the idea that IEDs are a cowardly and unfit way for a man to fight, which seems like a great idea to me.

I wanted to ask you a little bit more about this. In your earlier answer, you talked about trying to stop these spectacular attacks by -- you know, one of the -- the phrase you used was, you didn't know where the culminating point of victory was.

As you know, the history of that phrase is from Clausewitz, and he

said it was in this kind of conflict when the population comes to identify strongly with one side, which is about myth-making more than anything else. It's about exactly that kind of public affairs or information operations project.

So could you talk a bit about efforts that you may be doing on the public affairs or information operations side, trying to reach out to the Iraqi people and give them a sense that this is their country and it's something they should identify with and fight for, and that these people that they're fighting against are savages, cowards, whatever you like?

GEN. HOLMES: Hey, that's a great question. And I'm glad you came back to the culminating point reference.

I understand that there is a culminating point, and it is when one side -- particularly, in this case, the populace -- then sides with one or the other. I think what I really meant was when I said I don't know where -- I'm just not sure where we are in identifying it in this particular fight. Okay?

So we are engaged in a hearts-and-minds. That's clearly important in this kind of endeavor. It's what I like to call a guns- and-roses campaign, from my old SOCOM -- the Special Operations Command -- days, when I was assigned just across the base here at MacDill, at U.S. SOCOM. We called it a heart -- a guns-and-roses campaign. And while you've got the guns to do what have got to be done to the bad guys, you've got to accompany that with roses that do go out to the hearts and minds.

We're looking at the discrediting of the suicide bomber. We're looking at this understanding on behalf of not only the Iraqis but of the entire region that the violent extreme actors that would use these instruments of -- these explosive devices to kill dozens and hundreds of Iraqis -- and then let's look at Afghanistan, where civilians are used in a process to screen Taliban fighters, so that civilians then become embroiled in a target and are killed there as a civilian casualty, because they were used by the Taliban.

It's very important that people understand that, that these violent extremists that -- would have so little value on human life that they'd carry this to an unwitting, unsuspecting and very -- well, I don't know the right word -- to a populace and use them in that way. I mean, that is clearly wrong. And what we believe is that people, when they understand this -- the majority of us all as people share the same kind of hopes and dreams and desires to have a peaceful and prosperous life. And that's very important.

Now that's not to, and I want to be very clear in this. It is not a propaganda campaign to go in and say, made in the USA; do it our way. You know, no, it's to have an international community that shares hopes and desires and prosperity so that we live peacefully.

And for military folks, that's very important. Because as we look at where we are as a military, understanding that there are so many

indicators of these kinds of conflicts in our future, we're -- we understand that military combat option, direct, kinetic actions don't necessarily win hearts and minds. And for us to continue to be America's Department of Defense and a partner in the international community, military leaders would like to be able to participate in such a way that our combat power is an advantage when we need it but clearly that we work and partner along the lines of the roses in order to win those hearts and minds.

So again, I go back to what I call the "guns and roses" campaign, and for the military we understand it takes the guns, but it also takes the roses.

Q You mentioned IEDs earlier. I was talking to one of our military -- U.S. military officers who's been stationed in Thailand for a while. And he told me in our conversation that the only other place the military is seeing these kinds of very well-advanced IEDs, that he was aware of, was in the southern Thai insurrection, I suppose would be as good a way to define it as anything. So if you're looking at Pakistan, you might want to look at southern Thailand too. It's kind of interesting because the enemy there is particularly shadowy and difficult to define in terms of who exactly is involved in it.

GEN. HOLMES: Right. Good.

MR. HOLT: Okay, do we have any follow-up questions? I know we're running a little bit short on time here.

Hello?

GEN. HOLMES: I'm still here.

MR. HOLT: Okay. I just heard a beep there and I wasn't sure whether they turned us off.

General, do you have any closing statements?

GEN. HOLMES: Only that I -- again, I value this because I think this kind of dialogue is very, very important, particularly as I think we in the military certainly assess where we are and what we do to be more effective. Again I go back to the nature of this enemy -- it's global, it's transnational, it's very adaptive; it spirals its development very quickly. And this is something that in the military we've talked about for a few years. It's what -- I go back to John Boyd's principle on the OODA Loop -- to observe, orient, decide, and act. And clearly, that's where we are right now, I think, as your military, is learning how we spiral ourselves against this kind of opponent.

So this dialogue is very, very important to me as we continue to adapt and act as a military and as we explore those things that are in some ways outside of our kit bag. So the way for me to understand my job better, I think, is really to dialogue with you and understand what's on your mind and where you're coming from.

So I just want to thank you for the opportunity to do this.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir, and we look forward to the next round when we discuss some of the things -- as you've mentioned, some of the other things outside of Baghdad and in and around Iraq.

So we appreciate the opportunity to speak to you on those matters, and we look forward to it, sir.

Thank you very much.

GEN. HOLMES: Great. Thanks a lot. Have a great day.

Q Thank you, General.

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